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**South Africa:  
The Growing Influence  
of the Military**

An Intelligence Assessment

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## South Africa: The Growing Influence of the Military

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### An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 20 January 1982  
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office  
of African and Latin American Analysis. Comments  
and queries are welcome and may be addressed to  
the Chief, Southern Africa Division, ALA, on  
[redacted]

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**South Africa:  
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**Key Judgments**

The South African military in a single generation has evolved from a home guard militia to a militarily and politically powerful Afrikaner institution. As US and other Western policymakers confront the "South African problem," they deal increasingly with situations and policies that are heavily influenced by the military. South African military leaders themselves are increasingly involved in diplomatic dealings with the outside world.

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The growing prominence of military views in Pretoria poses problems for US policymakers and diplomats. The military's drive for self-sufficiency and its current preoccupation with the security threat posed by externally based insurgents will make South Africa a cautious, often dogged negotiator on issues such as the Namibia problem. Cut off from the West because of the government's racial policies, South African military leaders are increasingly insular in outlook and thus less susceptible to influence from abroad.

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Over the longer term, the growing self-assurance and influence of the military, which is among the most progressive of Afrikaner institutions, could enhance the prospects for peaceful change within South Africa. Having confronted more directly than others the constraints imposed by racial policies and international isolation, the military constitutes one of the country's most adaptive elites and has adopted racial reforms that outdistance those in other major Afrikaner institutions. If the military threat to South Africa stabilizes—which would allow the military to regain its broader vision of the challenge facing white South Africans—the increased prominence of the military could serve US interests by fostering peaceful change in South Africa.

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The government of Prime Minister Botha, who served as Defense Minister for 12 years, has been at least partly structured along military lines. Botha clearly relies heavily on military advisers who served him during his tenure as Defense Minister.

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This interdependent relationship between South Africa's civilian and military leaders carries with it some potential threats to the country's Western democratic traditions. Although we think it unlikely that the military will act on the occasionally discussed idea of an "enlightened dictatorship," much will depend on how the domestic and regional situation unfolds and how effective the military is in selling the need for racial reform to the rest of society. The trend is clear, however, and as South Africans become increasingly anxious about their security, the role and prestige of the military will continue to grow, perhaps including the eventual elevation to Prime Minister of General Malan in a replay of the Afrikaner tradition of soldier-statesman. [REDACTED]

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### South Africa: The Growing Influence of the Military

#### The Military Buildup

Afrikaners gained full control of South Africa's armed forces by the late 1950s, but it took almost two decades for the military to become a full-fledged Afrikaner institution with significant political clout. Prior to the 1960s, few South Africans saw any real external threat, the police had primary responsibility for internal security, and the military services remained a budgetary backwater. Military spending accounted for less than 7 percent of the budget (less than 1 percent of GNP) and weapons consisted mainly of a few tanks, armored cars, and outdated American and British aircraft.

A series of internal and external shocks over the past 20 years, however, has transformed the military and thrust its leaders into a central policy role. The Sharpeville incident in 1960—in which the police killed 76 and wounded 186 blacks engaged in a nonviolent demonstration—triggered a sharp increase in the defense effort. Between 1960 and 1965, military spending increased fourfold, consuming over 20 percent of the budget and 2 to 3 percent of the GNP. After the UN's imposition of a voluntary arms embargo in 1963, made mandatory in 1977, South Africa turned to local arms production, spending over \$1 billion during the 1960s. Defense expenditures leveled off near the end of the decade as South Africans believed the threat had stabilized and become manageable at existing levels of funding.

The collapse of Portuguese rule in Mozambique and Angola, the Soviet and Cuban intervention in the Angolan civil war, and the Soweto riots in 1976 stimulated another major spurt in South Africa's military buildup. By 1977 defense spending was nearly five times its 1972 levels, accounting for over 5 percent of the GNP. National service requirements for white males doubled from 12 to 24 months, and today more than half of the white men between 18 and 45 serve in the active armed forces or in reserve units. The Botha government announced last August that defense spending would go up another 30 percent in the next year.

#### Creating an Afrikaner Institution

A bitter Parliamentary debate over whether South Africa should enter World War II on the side of the British climaxed a longstanding battle between a coalition of internationally minded Afrikaners and English speakers and intensely nationalistic, anti-British Afrikaners. Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog, who had favored South African neutrality, was narrowly defeated on the war issue and was replaced by his deputy, Afrikaner World War I hero Jan Christian Smuts.

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General Smuts declared war on Germany in September 1939 and began raising a volunteer force for service abroad. Only those willing to swear allegiance to King George were eligible for wartime duty, however, and anti-British Afrikaners opposed to Smuts's war policy found it difficult to advance within the military or to find jobs in an economy dominated by English speakers.

After taking power in 1948, the National Party government began systematically to eradicate English-speaking dominance of all key social and political institutions. The effort to turn the government into an Afrikaner institution was particularly intense in the military. Many British-trained, English-speaking officers were forced to retire. Legislation was passed requiring that all officers, noncommissioned officers, and permanent force members—that is, the professional regulars—to be fluent in both English and Afrikaans, effectively discouraging recruitment of English speakers who were not inclined to be bilingual. As was the case with the civil service, the military rapidly became a favored career opportunity for upwardly mobile Afrikaners who were still largely excluded from business professions dominated by English speakers.

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Table 1

**South African Defense Force  
(as of February 1981)**

Active Duty Forces	Reservists
<b>Permanent force (25,000-30,000)</b>	<b>Citizen force (100,000-120,000)</b>
Career cadre to provide training, support, and leadership to conscripts and called-up reservists.	Ready reserve.
Minimum tour of duty is three years.	Called up for 30 days of refresher training each year for eight years.
About 40 percent in Army, 40 percent in Air Force, and remainder in Navy.	Army, Air Force, Navy components.
<b>National servicemen (52,000-60,000)</b>	<b>Commandos (100,000-120,000)</b>
Conscripts.	Home guard.
All able white men must serve.	Called up for 30 days of refresher training each year for eight years.
Two years continuous service before eight years reserve duty in Citizen force or Commandos.	Army Commandos organized as rural, industrial, and urban units; Air Commandos being phased out.

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Military thinking has changed as well. South African strategic doctrine adjusted to the deterioration of military ties with the West—climaxed by South Africa's failure to interest NATO in a South Atlantic treaty and the British termination in 1975 of their naval cooperation agreement with Pretoria—and changed its emphasis from serving a conventional role in the Western alliance to meeting the growing threat of foreign-based insurgency. New priority missions, such as counterinsurgency operations, close air support of mobile ground forces, commando strike operations, coastal patrol and interdiction, and riot control, replaced the previous focus on conventional, large-unit training.

**A Homogeneous Military**

The rapid expansion of the services accelerated the process of Afrikanerization of the military as more officer slots were created for Afrikaners eagerly seeking professional careers but still largely excluded from

business professions. Afrikaners now hold at least 80 percent of the top positions in the South African Defense Force (SADF)—85 percent in the Army, 75 percent in the Air Force, and 50 percent in the Navy. White English-speaking officers generally hold less responsible positions. The Afrikaner's historic distrust of English speakers—long viewed as the internal allies of former colonial masters and not members of Africa's "white tribe"—is reflected in their careful monitoring of English speakers.

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The elevation of General Malan from SADF chief to Defense Minister in 1980 marked the end of influence of aging World War II veterans in the SADF hierarchy. The current leaders are young—most are in their early fifties—and have had little combat experience outside the region—for example, only 10 active duty South African officers served in Korea. Virtually all top SADF officers have had commands in Namibia; the commanders of the Army in South-West Africa have gone on to serve as chief of the Army, chief of the SADF and, in Malan's case, Defense Minister.

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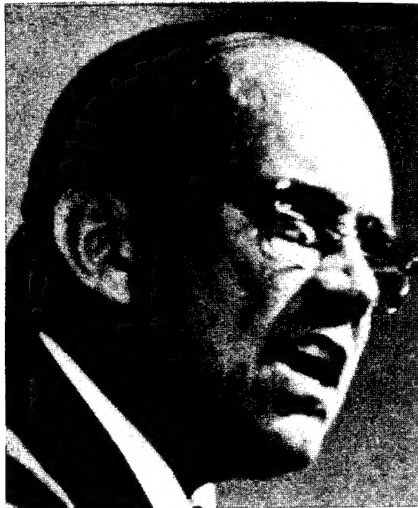
South African military professionals have had little exposure to outside influences. Since most Western countries stopped admitting South Africans to their training schools in the early 1960s—Malan was the last to attend the General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth—the South African military has become increasingly insular. The SADF recognizes this and in 1980 doubled its overseas training budget to approximately \$1 million. Its military exchange programs, however, are limited to other "pariah" states such as Paraguay, Argentina, Taiwan, and Israel. Generally, top officers increasingly receive all of their military training within the SADF system and have

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*General Magnus Andre de Merindol Malan*

Camera Press ©

*General Constand Laubscher Viljoen*

Camera Press ©

Malan was appointed Defense Minister in October 1980. Previously, he was Chief of the SADF, Chief of the Army, Commanding General of the South-West Africa Command, and Commandant of South African Military Academy, often as the youngest ever to hold these positions. Now 52, Malan is a close confidant of Prime Minister Botha and a leading government spokesman. The last South African to attend the US General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth—he was there in 1961-62—Malan admires US principles of military organization and Israeli defense strategy. Malan never served as a foreign liaison officer, but in 1979, he visited Paraguay, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, apparently offering to sell South African arms.

Viljoen was appointed Chief of SADF in October 1980, previously having served as Chief of the Army, commander of the first division-size unified tactical force in Namibia, and liaison officer to insurgent groups in Angola. He received military training entirely within the SADF educational system and has traveled little abroad. Viljoen is viewed as a hard-driving military professional with little of Malan's political sophistication. Although only 48 years old, Viljoen has long expressed the desire to retire to his farms, but was prevailed upon to serve as Malan's replacement.

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little opportunity to travel abroad, particularly to those Western countries still viewed by most military men as South Africa's "natural" allies

The military's isolation, apart from other pariah states, contributes to its adoption of a harder and more aggressive line on security issues. The military is

determinedly self-sufficient and frequently asserts proudly its ability to meet the challenge of Communist-inspired insurgencies without the help of its former Western allies. Great admiration is often expressed for Israel. Israeli strategic concepts and practices, such as deep preemptive strikes and aggressive cross-border tactics, figure prominently in South African military thinking. While acknowledging that

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South African security problems must ultimately be solved by political means, senior military leaders frequently assert that political considerations must not interfere with military operations, arguing that in the short run it is imperative to provide military security as a prerequisite for any long-term political solutions. [REDACTED]

#### An Adaptive Elite

Despite their growing provincialism, military officers probably constitute the most progressive Afrikaner group in South Africa. More than any other major institution, the military has directly confronted the constraints imposed by South Africa's racial policies and international isolation. The disruption of Western military ties, the collapse of other white regimes in southern Africa, the arms embargo, increased insurgent activity, and the limited pool of white male manpower have forced the military to adapt to circumstances radically different from those in the 1950s. Their response has been to advocate "hard line" foreign policies emphasizing preemptive military actions while pressing for "soft line" domestic policies stressing limited racial reform. [REDACTED]

**Racial Policies.** South Africa's military buildup could not be accommodated by the limited pool of white males, despite doubling their national service requirement and recently abolishing all exemptions based on employment. In addition to expanded programs for recruiting white women, manpower constraints have caused the military to recruit nonwhites and to institute racial reforms within the various services.

- In 1963, the Colored Corps was created as an auxiliary, noncombatant unit primarily serving in the Navy. Although initially unarmed and not eligible for career service, by the early 1970s Colored enlistees could join the Permanent Force and be trained for, but not assigned to, combat units.
- The Indians were the second nonwhite community tapped for service. As with the Coloreds, the Indians were treated distinctly and organized into their own separate military unit, the Indian Corps commissioned in 1974. Indians receive weapons training, but are assigned only noncombatant duties, again principally in the Navy.



Limited racial integration in the South African Military [REDACTED]

- Recruiting blacks was a more contentious issue for Afrikaner military officers, many of whom retained traditional notions that "only the British would think of arming Bantu." The first blacks were admitted in the mid-1970s and were trained as armed guards, drivers, clerks, and dog handlers. Recently, however, the Army formed two black Army battalions which are slated primarily for counterinsurgency operations in rural tribal areas. [REDACTED]

The South African military eliminated many racially discriminatory regulations in 1978, and since then it has commissioned a few Colored officers whom whites must salute. Whites and nonwhites receive equal pay for the same job, a reform in which the military takes considerable pride. Despite this progress, senior military officers have expressed dissatisfaction with the slow progress in recruiting nonwhites, who now comprise almost 20 percent of the Navy's career personnel and total 5,000 and 200 in the Army and Air Force, respectively. [REDACTED]

Despite their limitations, including little impact outside the military, these racial reforms outdistance those in other major institutions in South Africa. The

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Table 2



Percent


General Johannes Jacobus Geldenhuys

**Racial Composition of Active Duty Personnel <sup>a</sup>**

	Army	Navy	Air Force	Totals
Whites	92.3	81.3	98.1	92.2
Coloreds	6.2	13.0	0.8	6.0
Indians	0	5.7	0.2	0.5
Blacks	1.5	0	0.9	1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>a</sup> Includes both career and conscripted personnel, mid-1981.


  
 military probably has been the most forceful Afrikaner advocate of internal reform. Defense Minister Malan is often given credit for formulating after the Soweto riots in 1976 the "80-20" theory, which holds that only 20 percent of the threat to the country's stability is external while 80 percent is internal and the result of legitimate nonwhite grievances. 

**An Aggressive Foreign Policy.** Malan's advocacy of internal reforms, which presumably constitute 80 percent of the "total strategy" to meet internal threats to South African security, has been overshadowed in recent months by "hardline" rhetoric on military preparations to meet the "Communist-directed total onslaught." The increasing intensity of South African cross-border operations, particularly into Angola, reflects the growing influence in Pretoria of the military, which has long pressed for greater freedom to act against externally based insurgent groups. Since the major incursion into Angola in late August-early September 1981, which resulted in the killing and capture of Soviet personnel, senior military spokesmen have not warned of the necessity to make racial reforms, but have focused almost exclusively on preparing to fight on the "second front," defined variously as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, or terrorism within South Africa 


This change in emphasis—which in effect drops the "80-20" formulation—has been reflected in the government-controlled media's traditional yearend wrap-ups for 1981 and forecasts for the coming year. The



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*Geldenhuys was appointed Chief of the South African Army in October 1980. He previously served for almost 10 years in Namibia, including three years as Commanding Officer of the South-West Africa Command, and five years as military attache in Portugal. One of the most experienced senior officers, Geldenhuys frequently is a member of South African negotiating teams on Namibia. Only 47 years old, Geldenhuys has held several top staff positions* 

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challenge for 1982 is identified as the growing security threat posed by the Soviet-orchestrated onslaught. The South African Government's preoccupation with military concerns, particularly evident in the public comments by its military spokesmen, appears intended to prepare domestic audiences for increased security measures, including higher budgets and new legislation, not to make them more receptive to internal reforms necessary for any long-term political accommodation with South African blacks 

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Although they are not now stressing domestic political issues, senior military officers continue to believe they have an important role in preparing the country for the long struggle to survive. In their view, national service serves broader goals than simply providing the manpower necessary to meet the growing insurgent threat. The SADF's continued reliance on a force comprised principally of conscripts and reservists—rather than a larger permanent standing army—is frequently justified by the need to introduce as many whites as possible to the sacrifices of national service, socializing them in the process of their patriotic obligations as South African citizens. Much of the military's pressure for a liberal policy on cross-border operations reportedly stems from its conviction that the best way to keep the troops on a prepared footing is to keep them active, in effect training for the more serious battles that lie in the future. [REDACTED]

#### A More Active Role in the Future

Since Botha became Prime Minister in 1978, the military's voice in policymaking has grown substantially. Not only did Botha continue to rely heavily on advisers that served him during his 12 years as Defense Minister, he also recast the overall government decisionmaking apparatus along military lines with military officers serving on all important committees. When security issues are involved, military views prevail regularly over positions advocated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the civilian National Intelligence Service. Military officers increasingly represent South Africa in diplomatic dealings; for example, General Geldenhuys is a regular member of the South African negotiating team on Namibia, and military officers frequently visit other pariah states. [REDACTED]

Few observers believe that the military would ever seize power from civilian authorities—as Malan commented recently, "Coups are certainly not our South African way of doing things." Greater concern is expressed about the prospects of a "*verligte* (enlightened) dictatorship," imposed by Prime Minister Botha

and supported by the military, in frustration over the inability to initiate racial reforms over rightwing opposition. After the strong rightwing backlash in the general elections in April 1981, there was speculation, particularly among *verligte* Afrikaners, over the possibility that Botha would dissolve Parliament and rule by executive powers if attempts at reform were unsuccessful and domestic unrest was increasing. [REDACTED]

Such a scenario is difficult to envision, however, since it requires of Botha considerably more political courage than he has demonstrated so far, not to mention a paramount concern for internal reform scarcely evident in his recent pronouncements. Another, considerably more likely, scenario is the eventual elevation of Defense Minister Malan to the premiership, a replay of the Afrikaner tradition of soldier-statesman. General Malan's popularity is on the rise, and he was recently elected to the executive committee of the Transvaal Caucus of the National Party, an unusual honor for a political newcomer. Even though Malan probably would not follow policies significantly different from Botha's, he would be in a stronger political position to move forward than Botha appears to be. [REDACTED]

#### Implications for the United States

The military's growing influence in Pretoria makes South Africa a more cautious negotiator over security issues, including Namibia. Senior military officials have been forced to seek self-sufficiency—largely, in their view, by undependable allies—and will be reluctant to entrust South African interests to externally backed arrangements. So far, the military has been unwilling to allow international political repercussions to affect battlefield operations, witness the scheduling of a major action into Angola during the Western Contact Group's tour of southern Africa last November in pursuit of a negotiated settlement in Namibia. Considering the standing the military currently enjoys in South Africa, it is unlikely that Botha would agree to any Namibian solution not fully supported by the military. This support may be difficult to obtain in view of the military's current preoccupation with the

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security threat posed by externally based insurgents and the substantial investment that the SADF has made in facilities in northern Namibia [REDACTED]

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In the longer term, however, the military still is among the most enlightened of Afrikaner institutions, one that has actually acted upon perceptions that internal reform is necessary for white survival. If the military threat to South Africa stabilizes—which would allow the military to regain its broader vision of the challenge facing white South Africans—the increased prominence of the military could serve US interests by fostering peaceful change in South Africa. [REDACTED]

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